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LINCOLN AND GORGIAS

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Seven years ago I carried with me to Berlin as an antidote against Prussian bureaucracy and despotism the Everyman selection of Lincoln's speeches and letters. I had bought it in Paternoster Row behind St. Paul's in London (may Heaven defend that sacred place against Zeppelin and his bombs!). The little book was also to serve as an antidote against certain other noxious influences to which I was about to subject myself. I am not referring now to the Lessing Theater, the Royal Opera, or to any of the stimulating lecturers whom it was my good fortune to hear (may Heaven defend them also!). But a small portion of my winter had been dedicated to a journey across that high and arid tableland, Spengel's *Rhetores Graeci*. It was to be a sort of botanical expedition—an investigation of the flora, so to speak, a more careful study of the flowers of speech in the ancient world. After a long *Gänsemarsch* through fields of artificial flowers, what could be more refreshing than a look into some old-fashioned garden—into some book unbedizened with any form of meretricious embellishment? Lincoln's speeches seemed the very book. In fact, Ambassador Bryce, who had made the Everyman selection, gave assurance (at least by implication) in his excellent introduction that Lincoln and Gorgias represented the two antipodes of the stylistic world. But before the winter was over my mind became so infected with the Gorgian figures that I could see them everywhere without effort, and even in Lincoln's speeches. It was a pleasant discovery to find some affinity between the great Sicilian and the still greater American; it seemed to give an added glory to them both. The fact that Lincoln, without any training in formal rhetoric, by a certain divine intuition had rediscovered for himself some of the Gorgian figures and had used them to give power to the expression of his

thought seemed to add some fraction of a cubit to his intellectual stature; but still more it seemed to make amends for the harsh criticism which Gorgias had suffered through the centuries since Aristotle. The rhetorical forms that had been so severely censured as the marks of superficial sham and insincerity had somehow proved themselves capable of sincerity. We all hate mere rhetoric, i.e., form without content; we hate the art that cannot conceal itself. It is a rather difficult matter to conceal a Gorgian figure, and the thought must be indeed profound and fundamental that can make the reader forget balanced clauses, antitheses, alliterations, and other assonances. But the thought which Lincoln had to present could stand the strain. Put the matter to the test; cut the nightingale to pieces and try to discover the song. Read over the Gettysburg speech. A careful examination will reveal in twenty-seven lines two antitheses, five cases of anaphora, eight instances of balanced phrases and clauses, thirteen alliterations. Yet the thought is so compelling that ordinarily we do not notice the subtle means that are used to intensify the emotional content of the speech. But take another instance in which the Gorgian element makes no attempt to conceal itself, the letter addressed to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862. In forty-four lines we have six completely balanced sentences, eight cases of anaphora, six instances of similar clause endings, six antitheses. Even the encomium of Helen attributed to Gorgias is not so completely Gorgian in its embellishment. And yet no one today would attempt to revise this letter in the hope that he could set forth the same thought with greater power and impressiveness, or with such perspicuity, appropriateness, and brevity. The historical importance of the letter is sufficient to justify reprinting it entire, even if it did not illustrate the matter under discussion.

I have just read yours of the 19th instant, addressed to myself through the *New York Tribune*.

If there be in it any statements or assumptions of fact which I may know to be erroneous, I do not now and here controvert them.

If there be in it any inferences which I believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here argue against them.

If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it, in deference to an old friend whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave anyone in doubt. I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution.

The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be—the Union as it was.

If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them.

If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them.

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery.

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

What I do about slavery and the coloured race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.

I shall do less whenever I shall believe that what I am doing hurts the cause; and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.

I shall try to correct errors where shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views as fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my views of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

A study of Lincoln's speech of June 17, 1858, reveals similar tendencies. The following passage of eleven lines offers six antitheses, six instances of balanced sentence structure, two cases of anaphora, and four alliterations:

I believe the government cannot endure permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it to cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new, North as well as South.

The rest of the speech, which is nine pages in length, presents sixteen additional cases of anaphora, forty-five instances of marked alliteration, seventeen rhetorical questions, fourteen instances of balanced sentence structure.

Lincoln's reply to Douglas, July 10, 1858, is a speech of seventeen and a half pages; in it we find forty pronounced alliterations, forty-eight examples of anaphora, thirty instances of balanced sentence structure, thirty-four rhetorical questions.

A careful examination of the following sentences will throw some light on the question under investigation:

The former unprofaned by the foot of the invader, the latter undecayed by the lapse of time [page 4].

Let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice [page 5].

That we improved to the last, that we remained free to the last, that we revered his name to the last [page 6].

They were a fortress of strength, they were a forest of great oaks. . . . Despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage, unshaded and unshading [page 8].

Our fathers, our brothers, our sons, our friends. . . . To command his action, to dictate to his judgment, to mark him at once to be shunned and despised [page 15].

Repeal the Missouri Compromise, repeal all compromise, repeal the Declaration of Independence, repeal all past history, still you cannot repeal human nature [page 34].

The South flushed with triumph and tempted to excess, the North, betrayed, as they believed, brooding on wrong and burning for revenge. One side will provoke, the other will resent; the one will taunt, the other defy; one aggresses, the other retaliates. Already a few in the North defy all constitutional restraint, resist the execution of the Fugitive Slave Law, and even menace the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. Already a few in the South claim the constitutional right to take and hold slaves in the free states, demand the revival of the slave trade, and demand a treaty with Great Britain by which fugitive slaves may be reclaimed from Canada [page 32].

Stand with anybody who stands right. Stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong. Stand with the Abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise, and stand against him when he attempts to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law [page 33].

. . . it was conceived in violence, is maintained in violence and is being executed in violence [page 37].

. . . blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote the Declaration; and so they are.

That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together; that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world [page 93].

It is the first of its kind, it is the astonisher of legal history, it is a new wonder of the world.

He tells you he is for the Cincinnati platform; he tells you he is for the Dred Scott decision; he tells you he cares not if slavery is voted up or down; he tells you the struggle on Lecompton is past [page 88].

I am not a master of language, I have not a fine education, I am not capable of entering upon a disquisition in dialectics [page 83].

From the mouth of a king, an excuse for enslaving the people of a country; from the mouth of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race [page 93].

If I had made any mistake, I was ready to be corrected; if I had drawn any false inference with regard to Judge Douglas, I was fully prepared to modify it [page 96].

All the anxious politicians of our party, or who have been of the party for years past, have been looking upon him, as certainly at no distant day, to be President of the United States. They have seen in his round, jolly, fruitful face, post-offices, land-offices, marshalships and cabinet appointments, charge-ships and foreign missions, bursting and sprouting out in wonderful exuberance, ready to be laid hold of by their greedy hands [page 95].

In a rather hasty scrutiny of one hundred and seven pages I found eighty-four antitheses, one hundred and ninety-five cases of anaphora, four hundred and one cases of pronounced alliteration, and one hundred and seventy-six instances of balanced sentence structure—an average of eight Gorgian figures to the page. The number of figures found is not large enough to justify us in calling Lincoln a Gorgian in matters of style, but it is too large for us to overlook. It is plain that he was not innocent of the subtle arts of the public speaker. He cared more for his thought than for his style; but he cared so much for his thought that he studied with care the means of making it incisive and effective. He would drive it home with the trip-hammer blows of the anaphora; he would set it in high relief by an antithetic presentation of that which might serve as its foil; and he did not forget that the mind easily remembers alliterative phrases.